

## *The women who inspired me in 2019*

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### **Body**

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Last month, I sat in Koerner Hall listening to American blues and gospel singing icon Mavis Staples belt out some classic tunes to a packed house.

At 80, getting tired, or so she told us, Staples, a civil rights activist, sang unabashedly naughty ("Let's do it, again" ) and pointedly political ("We've got work to do").

But she didn't sing nice. Why bother? Her fabulously raspy voice was a sweet treat all on its own.

Her energizing concert reminded me there were enough compelling, courageous and even discomfiting female voices this past year that if you needed inspiration for anything you wanted to do or be, there was something for everyone.

There was New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern, 39, who last March became an impressive new model for effective leadership in a time of extreme crisis as she responded - with equal amounts of empathy, steely resolve and swift action on gun control - to the horrific mosque attacks by an alleged white nationalist in her country that left 51 dead.

Ardern's message that such lethal bigotry would not divide her country came in three simple words: "We are one."

And who would have thought that the sternest and most effective global voice on climate change action would be that of Greta Thunberg, the 16-year-old uncompromising Swedish girl with Asperger's syndrome who has galvanized the world to take part in climate action protests and strikes.

Thunberg is now a pop-culture activist/heroine and even a symbol, with her psychological differences, for something called "neurodiversity."

The teenager is also inevitably a lightning rod for climate denying scorn, but so what? Never underestimate, as she said, "the force of angry kids."

Still, most of the women who personally moved me this year came from the Mavis Staples end of the demographic - women over 60.

Women used to become invisible as they aged - presumably because they could no longer hold the attention of the male gaze.

Now they give master classes in how to play the long game.

For long-term literary excellence and relevance on a global scale, who can beat our own Margaret Atwood?

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This past year, as she shared the Booker Prize with Bernardine Evaristo, (author of "Girl, Woman, Other") Atwood had already proved that her 1985 dystopian classic "The Handmaid's Tale " - a hit series on Hulu - had a long reach indeed.

She won the Booker this year for "The Testaments," a taut sequel that impressed on its own merits and continued the highly relevant examination - in the Trump era - of how women in an American religious hegemony were stripped of their rights and what they did to fight back.

Turning a landmark 80, Atwood also had a sad year, losing her beloved longtime life partner, the author Graeme Gibson who suffered from dementia and died at 85.

As soon as her new book was released, I saw a moving sight: women of all ages clutching "The Testaments" with its startlingly bright green cover as if it were meant for them personally.

Atwood has always maintained that writing is "an act of hope." What better inspiration to take into 2020 as we try and fail - and try again - to be good writers who can make sense of our troubled times?

As if the Right Honourable Beverley McLachlin, 76, who retired in 2017 as the Supreme Court of Canada's first female chief justice and the longest serving chief justice in our history, hasn't accomplished enough in her much lauded legal career, she now is the best-selling author of two very different books, a novel, "Full Disclosure," and this year's poignant memoir "Truth Be Told."

I've read both books and no fiction McLachlin or anyone else could create can compare to the true life story of, as she likes to call herself, "a country girl of no consequence" who grew up in Pincher Creek, Alta., in a log house without plumbing or electricity and ended up presiding over such pivotal issues as Indigenous rights, same-sex marriage, how a province could legally try to secede and medically assisted death.

McLachlin speaks openly in her book about a teenage bout of depression - brought on by a winter of isolation - that had her briefly contemplating suicide.

What impressed me about McLachlin was not just her talent, determination and grace, but how much she personifies the very quality she admires in her fellow citizens: "Over and over, I was taken aback by the sheer decency of my fellow Canadians," she wrote.

And finally, I sat riveted in front of my screen during the U.S. congressional impeachment inquiry when Marie "Masha" Yovanovitch, 61, former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, a career diplomat with impeccable credentials, calmly but with emotional force told the inquiry how she was ousted from her sensitive post at the request, apparently, of President Donald Trump.

Trump, in true Godfather style, apparently told the Ukraine president that Yovanovitch was "bad news" and was going to "go through some things."

When asked to describe how she felt about the president of the United States ostensibly throwing her under the bus to a foreign power, she replied in a classically diplomatic understatement, "It didn't sound good."

Yovanovitch was also historically smeared in real time during the inquiry by the Tweeter-in-Chief, who failed to realize that even his tweet could be seen as intimidating witnesses.

Yovanovitch's hard won composure as she testified was an example of professionalism under pressure.

Let's hope American decency prevails there, too.

Twitter: @judithtimson

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